ELDERBERRY ARCHIVES

BY ZERBYTRON

A SERIES FOR ALL AGES ABOUT TWO GRANDPAS NAMED JOHN AND GEORGE, ALONG WITH THEIR PURPLE MONKEY FRIEND NAMED PEANUT AND THE GRUMPY HENRY.

ARCHIVE #5: THE WOODEN CHEST

Henry's dumpster had seen better days. The pale nightmare creature from 404 School Street had clawed it, dented it, rattled it, and finally bent one entire side inward a few days earlier. Dried beans still clung to the outside of it from George's emergency-bean disaster.

After coming back from Roll-a-Rama Café and going into the next afternoon, he tried repairing his home. The lid no longer closed completely, the hinges creaked in protest, and the bottom bulged like it was trying to escape the rest of the frame.

Henry stood in front of it, arms crossed, staring. "You have got to be kidding me."

He tried bending the lid back into place. It didn't budge. He kicked the side, but the crack widened. He grabbed a wrench and a board and made three stubborn attempts at repair. Despite that, nothing held.

He stepped back. "It's done. I need a new dumpster."

He did not like that truth, but he could not avoid it.

He groaned, grabbed his jar of pickle juice, a small crate of tomatoes, the least dented of his old belongings, and trudged up Larrow Road toward the house where Grandpa John, Grandpa George, and Peanut lived, which was located in the quiet subdivision they called Northcrest Heights.

John sat on the front porch with Peanut, enjoying the cool afternoon. The clouds hung low and gray, but the air felt calm.

Henry stomped up the walkway. "My dumpster is destroyed."

John stood. "That creature did a lot of damage."

Henry nodded. "It shredded my walls. The bottom is warped. I cannot live in it anymore."

John glanced toward the backyard. "We thought this might happen. So George and I bought something."

Henry's eyes narrowed. "What?"

John led him around to the side yard.

There sat a new metal dumpster. Dark green, clean, and unbent. The lid opened smoothly. The hinges were strong. The inside was empty and ready.

Henry stared at it.

“You got this… for me?” he asked.

John nodded. “Yes. So you can stay on Larrow Road. It’s quieter here than Benton Street.”

Henry stepped closer, inspected the corners, tested the lid, and nodded slowly. “This will do.”

He climbed inside, looked around, and then popped his head over the rim. “I live here now. Northcrest Heights has a proper grump.”

Peanut raised a sign:

“WELCOME TO THE NEIGHBORHOOD.”

Henry smirked. “Do not make it too cheerful.”

Meanwhile, inside the house, George decided to clean out the attic.

He climbed the ladder up to the opening, pushed aside old boxes, dusty lamps, and forgotten holiday decorations. Near the back, under a collapsed stack of magazines, he spotted a small wooden chest. It was just large enough to hold a baseball inside.

The wood had once been orange-brown, but time had turned it into a dull dark brown. The front edge of the lid was chipped. The surface felt brittle, like it would splinter if pressed too hard. The polish had worn away in uneven patches.

George picked it up carefully and inspected the item.

“Treasure,” he said to himself.

He carried it downstairs and placed it on the kitchen table.

John walked in and stopped. “Where did you get that?”

George scratched his head. “Found it in the attic.”

John frowned. “I don’t remember owning that.”

George shrugged. “Well, you can have it.”

John studied the chest. “Thank you… I think.”

Something about it felt wrong, though he couldn’t explain why.

Peanut stepped closer and raised a sign:

“IT BETTER NOT BE ANYTHING BAD.”

George waved a hand. “I don’t think so.”

John ran his fingers along the cracked lid. “If it’s been in the attic untouched for years, why does it look like it’s been heavily used?”

George thought about it. “Maybe time did it?”

John considered this, then shrugged. “Could be.”

He picked up the chest and carried it to his bedroom, then placed it on his dresser as decor.

He stepped back and turned to Peanut. “How does it look?”

Peanut held up a sign:

“CREEPY AND SUSPICIOUS.”

John asked, “Is that normal for something stored in a dark attic for years?”

Peanut flipped to another sign:

“NO. TOO DAMAGED. TOO STRANGE.”

John went quiet.

Nothing happened that night.

On the second night, John lay in bed with the light off. The house settled with its usual creaks. He drifted toward sleep.

Somewhere nearby, he heard a soft shuffle, like wood dragging across fabric.

He opened his eyes.

The room looked normal and the chest sat exactly where he had left it.

He told himself, “Old houses make noises,” and went back to sleep.

On the third night, he woke suddenly to the sound of wood snapping.

He sat up.

Nothing moved.

He glanced at the window and saw tree branches swaying. “Probably a branch.”

He lay down again.

On the fourth night, right as he began to drift off, six tones rang out together.

It sounded exactly like someone had strummed all the strings on a guitar at once — but there was no guitar in the room.

He got up slowly and looked at the dresser. The chest sat in the same place. John did not sleep quickly after that.

On the fifth night, he heard a sigh. Not his own. Not George’s. Something else. It lingered just long enough for him to be sure he had heard it.

On the sixth night, a loud crackle of static electricity sounded.

He sat up, heart pounding.

The chest didn’t move.

This continued for two weeks.

Some nights it was a shuffle. Other nights a pop, a crack, a sigh, or even a brief screech resembling that of a bird. By day, the chest looked like just a small, old box. By night, it felt like something was waiting.

One morning, George woke up with a sharp pain in the upper palm of his left hand. It was still dark outside the moment it happened.

He flexed his fingers. “Oof. Must be arthritis.”

A loud screech burst right next to his ear.

George jumped. “WHAT?! THAT’S THE WORST ALARM CLOCK EVER!!!”

John woke instantly and rushed into the room. “What happened?”

George pointed wildly. “Someone or something screamed into my ear! Loud!”

A shadowy figure drifted from the bed toward the door, then disappeared before reaching it. A distant screech echoed from somewhere down the hallway.

John returned to his room and looked at the dresser. The chest remained in place. He still wasn’t sure if it was the cause.

But doubt grew heavier.

A few nights later, the screech came again. It was in the room and closer.

The air changed, charged with a tense pressure. John felt it in his skin, in his chest. His stomach turned. A smell resembling soapy pretzels appeared. He couldn’t sleep. Nausea lingered at the edge of every breath.

Finally, he’d had enough.

He got out of bed, walked to the dresser, grabbed the chest with both hands, and carried it to the closet. He opened the closet door, hurled the chest inside, shut it, then returned to bed, pulled up the blanket, and tried to relax.

Then, a wooden crack sounded from inside the closet, followed by a screech.

John sat bolt upright. “That confirms it.”

In the doorway, Peanut held up a sign:

“GET RID OF IT.”

John said, “We’ll deal with it in the morning.”

That morning, John woke with part of his fingernail broken and a bruise on his lower left leg. He had no memory of bumping into anything in the night.

George opened the closet, grabbed the chest, and marched it to the kitchen. By this point, the polish had faded even more, and a new chipped area had appeared on the right side of the lid.

“Problem solved,” he said, dropping it into the large garbage can.

Layers of trash soon buried it beneath banana peels, wrappers, and yesterday’s leftovers.

John watched. “I doubt it.”

That night, he went to bed and left the lamp on. The room stayed peaceful. No screeches, snaps, or sighs. He slept without interruption.

The next evening, he walked through the kitchen and caught a glimpse of something — a shadow figure standing briefly by the garbage can.

He turned his head.

The garbage can sat where it always did, and the chest remained at the bottom.

Later that night, he got in bed and heard the screech again, followed by a shaking. Pressure built behind his eyes, and a dull ache spread across his forehead. A growl even sounded next to him.

John grumbled, “The garbage needs to go out.”

The next morning, George went outside, dragged the garbage can to the backyard, opened it, dug through the trash, and pulled out the chest. Then, he walked toward Henry's dumpster on the side.

Henry opened the lid halfway. "What are you holding?"

George smiled broadly and held out the chest. "It's dangerous to go alone, so take this!"

Henry stared at him.

Then snapped, "Do not hand me cursed attic junk like it's a heroic treasure!"

George hollered, "WHAT?! You want dirt food?!"

Henry glared. "Keep that thing away from me!"

George hesitated.

The garbage truck did not arrive that day due to inclement weather. Service was delayed for a week.

John groaned. "Of course."

George sighed. "So we're stuck with it."

Peanut held up a sign:

"DESTROY IT."

George didn't answer.

Later, when Henry had gone out to get some things from his other dumpster on Benton Street, George quietly took the chest and placed it inside Henry's new dumpster.

He closed the lid carefully.

No one saw.

That night before John went to bed, he heard multiple screeches from the direction of the side where Henry's new home was.

A loud, long, drawn-out moan followed.

Then came a frustrated yell. “WHAT WAS THAT?!”

George covered his mouth, trying not to laugh.

Henry threw open his lid and screamed, “GEORGE!”

George called back, grinning. “WHAT?! You want porridge?”

“I FOUND A PROBLEM!”

“You found a treasure?!”

“NO! YOU PUT THAT ROTTEN BOX IN HERE!”

George went silent and tried to look innocent.

John turned to George. “That was not funny.”

During the week, they heard more unsettling sounds: creepy laughter, strange chattering, and a deep metallic breathing that did not belong to any machine they owned.

Sometimes a dull pressure squeezed against John’s arm while he stood in the kitchen. Other times, Peanut would pause, stare at the hallway, and write nothing at all.

John began feeling unwell. He could not decide whether the cold feeling in his bones came from the gloomy weather or the chest. Some days he felt feverish. Other days his throat felt dry and rough.

Over lunch one day, George said, “We should’ve destroyed it.”

John nodded. “Yes. We should have.”

Peanut held up a sign:

“AGREED.”

George added, “You think Henry’s having trouble with it too?”

Henry’s voice traveled from the dumpster, loud and direct. “WHAT DO YOU THINK?! AND I KNOW EXACTLY WHY!”

The garbage truck finally arrived the next morning and took care of their bins, including the chest that Henry had tossed in there several nights prior.

For a brief time, the strange activity stopped. No scraping, screeching, or laughter. Everyone breathed a little easier.

But it did not stop completely.

Weeks turned into months. Most nights remained ordinary. Some did not.

One morning, John woke with a cold spot on his chest, like someone had pressed a block of ice there while he slept. His throat felt scratchy, as if he’d spent the night talking loudly even though he hadn’t spoken a word.

He remembered the dream he’d had: a large empty store with flickering lights. Long aisles. No people. Only shadows. A darker shape chasing him down rows of empty shelves as sections of the store went dark one by one.

John sat quietly at the kitchen counter, the memory’s weight lingering.

The next morning, it got worse.

John opened his eyes in bed and froze.

At the left end of the bed stood a solid black figure. Six feet tall. Chunky build. Wearing a hoodie with the hood up, covering most of the face.

John stared.

The figure remained motionless, observing him.

Seconds passed, then it turned and walked toward the bedroom door. Just before reaching the end of the bed frame, it vanished — gone, erased in an instant.

A distant screech echoed somewhere in the house.

John felt a headache forming, pressing behind his eyes. He sat up and rubbed his forehead. “The garbage truck didn’t fix this one.”

From the hallway, empty and still, came an unsettling laughter.

John frowned. “It’s not funny.”

It wasn’t until a day or so later that he noticed small dents in corners of the bedroom and closet. How long they had been there was unknown. It could’ve been recent or months ago.

And somewhere beyond Willowbrook, the last traces of the chest’s presence still lingered, faint but real, reminding them that not every problem can be tossed in the trash and carried away.